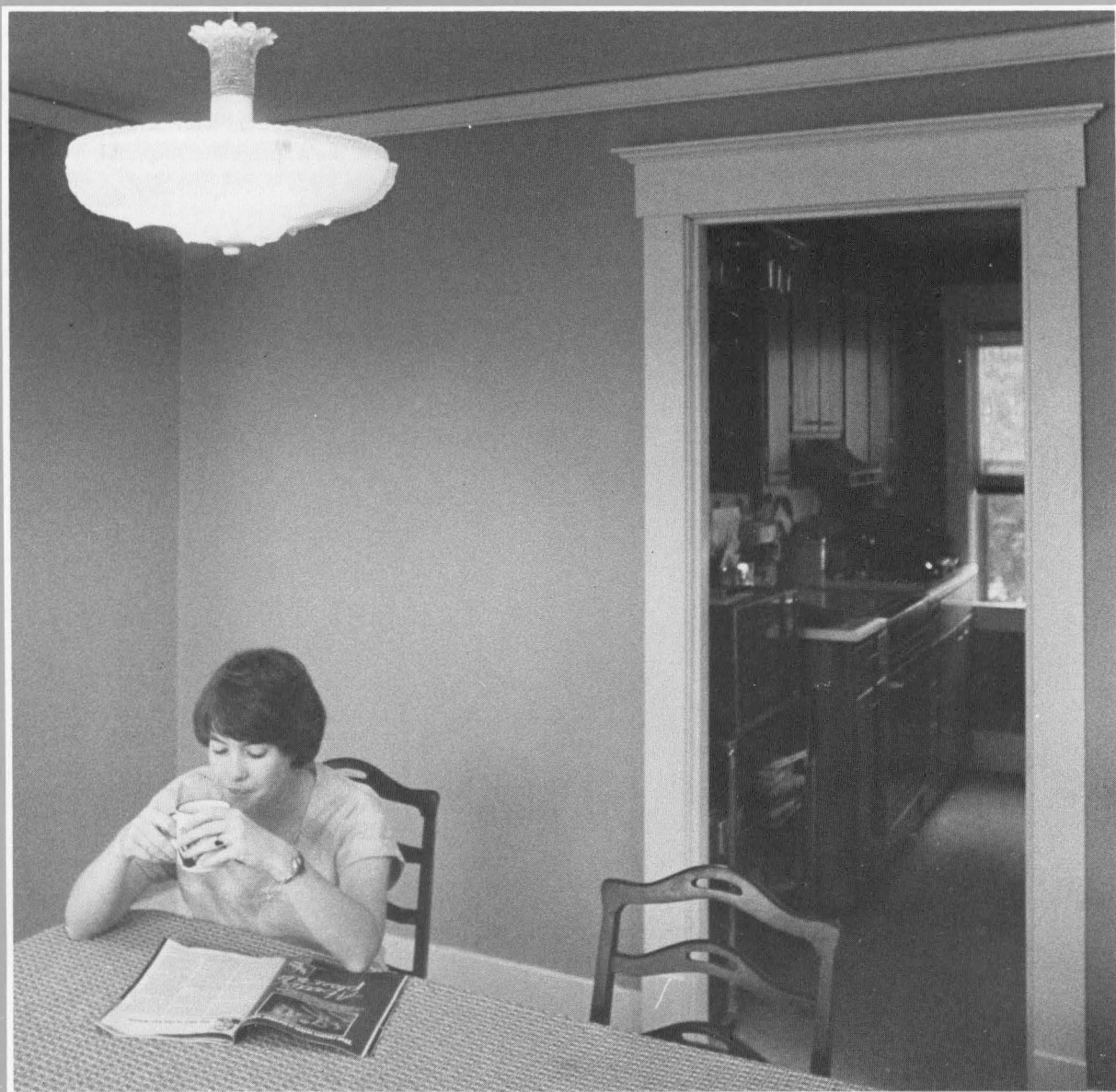


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## TURNING LONELY INTO ALONE

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
College of Agriculture  
Cooperative Extension Service  
Circular 1246



*"To be alone and to conquer loneliness is to build a private strength."*

**A**lmost all single parents feel lonely at least some of the time. It is perfectly natural to feel lonely as a relationship ends. There may also be other factors that influence your feelings of loneliness. Several events may lead to feeling lonely, and you may have experienced several of them recently. They include moving, the loss of friends, being by yourself on holidays, loss of income, or even loss of a job. If you have had more than one of these experiences, your loneliness may be intensified. But perhaps you say, "So what if I have good reasons for being lonely? I'm still lonely and I want to feel differently. Is there any hope for me?" The answer is yes. You can manage your loneliness. First you'll have to develop some skills for dealing with loneliness. Acquiring these skills will take some effort — things won't change overnight — but you'll gradually notice a difference in how you think, act, and feel.

## A Word About Children and Loneliness

Children can be a source of joy and provide you with a sense of worth, but they do not usually eliminate feelings of loneliness completely. We yearn for relationships in which there is a sense of equality, of give and take among adults. Our children depend on us, but we do not depend on them in the same way. This is not to say that children cannot be a comfort. One single mother spoke of how her three-year-old girl proceeded to pat her on the back while she cried, saying, "It's okay, it's okay." And when her mother finally tried to explain by saying, "I just lost my head," the youngster replied, "Well, just put it back on your shoulders." While children can be of some help, they are usually not enough. We seek some adult companionship to reduce our loneliness.

## Solitude versus Loneliness

We have two words to describe being alone. They are *solitude*, which refers to feeling peaceful and quiet within ourselves, and *loneliness*, which suggests feelings of discomfort, boredom, or sadness. As you think about your current situation, do you feel solitude or loneliness?

## Coping with Loneliness

What do you do when you feel lonely? You probably try several things to rid yourself of those feelings. Look at the following list of ways to manage loneliness. Decide which ones you have used to deal with being alone, and then circle the appropriate response. When I feel lonely, I . . .

	Often	Sometimes	Seldom
1. Listen to music	3	2	1
2. Write	3	2	1
3. Work or study	3	2	1
4. Exercise	3	2	1
5. Walk	3	2	1
6. Work on a hobby	3	2	1
7. Read	3	2	1
8. Play music	3	2	1
9. Cry	3	2	1
10. Sleep	3	2	1
11. Sit and think	3	2	1
12. Do nothing	3	2	1
13. Overeat	3	2	1
14. Take tranquilizers	3	2	1
15. Watch television	3	2	1
16. Get drunk or high	3	2	1
17. Call a friend	3	2	1
18. Visit someone	3	2	1
19. Volunteer to help others	3	2	1
20. Go out and meet new people	3	2	1
21. Call or visit an old friend	3	2	1
22. Join a club or organization	3	2	1
23. Spend money	3	2	1
24. Go shopping	3	2	1
25. Go for a drive	3	2	1

Almost all of us have tried many of these methods as a way of dealing with loneliness. Research has found that some methods are more effective than others.

Use the following guidelines to provide yourself with a profile of your ways of coping with loneliness:





1. Add your responses to items 1 through 8.  
This is your **Active Solitude** score \_\_\_\_\_.

A score from 17 to 24 indicates that you spend much of the time you are lonely involved in active and useful activities. Scores from 9 to 16 indicate that you spend some time in useful activities, and scores below 9 indicate that you seldom are actively involved in these ways.

2. Add your responses to items 9 through 16.  
This is your **Sad Passivity** score \_\_\_\_\_.

A score from 17 to 24 indicates that you are often passive and do little when alone. Scores from 9 to 16 indicate that sometimes you are sad and inactive, while scores below 9 reflect little sad passivity.

3. Add your responses to items 17 through 22.  
This is your **Social Action** score \_\_\_\_\_.

A score from 13 to 18 indicates that you are often socially active in response to lonely feelings. Scores from 6 to 12 indicate that sometimes you respond by getting involved socially. And scores below 6 indicate that you seldom respond this way.

4. Add your responses to items 23 through 25.  
This is your **Distraction** score \_\_\_\_\_.

Scores from 7 to 9 indicate that you often try to distract yourself when you feel lonely. Scores from 4 to 6 indicate that sometimes you try to distract yourself, and scores below 4 indicate that this is seldom your response.

## Active Solitude

One way you can deal with loneliness is to use it to develop yourself. What have you been doing that is listed in the first eight items? Can you use more of these activities? Being comfortable when you're alone takes time. Your first few moments of silence after the children have gone to bed at night or when they are away on weekends may bring feelings of fear, emptiness, or panic. Your initial reaction will likely be the desire to run away from the silence. Carin Rubinstein and Philip Shaver in their book on loneliness write, "Think of yourself *with yourself*, not *without* someone else." They suggest that you

relax, listen to music that suits your feelings, and enjoy being with yourself. Wait for those moments of fear and panic to pass. Find something engaging to do — hobbies, reading, music, exercise, writing, working, painting, and so forth.

Of course, seeking such solitude is difficult for newly single parents. Solitude is possible in part because we have a sense that we are connected with the world and others; having just suffered the loss of a relationship reminds us of how fragile our connections with others are. Solitude will not come easily but it *will* come. You must be patient with yourself and not expect blissful peace within a week or even a month. Gradually, you will notice that you're experiencing more and more solitude, less and less loneliness.







*"When you feel lonely, you've got to get out of it. Change your schedule, do something fun, be around people. You don't go in your house and shut the door. Don't do that!"*

## Sad Passivity

Do you find yourself trying to forget, trying to escape? Do you feel the hours of boredom with monotonous routines? People who turn away from others often experience extended loneliness, depression, and poor physical health. Engaging in passive behaviors can be harmful after a while. Rubinstein and Shaver note that the passive person often sinks lower and lower into the "dumps." Temporary feelings of loneliness can easily shift to feelings of self-contempt and inadequacy. As a single parent, it is easy to feel sorry for yourself and feel defeated. Don't be! Don't allow yourself to live life in a sad and passive way. Certainly there will be times when you will cry, sleep, watch television, or do nothing at all, but don't let such responses become routine.

## Social Action

While it seems trite, it is true that we find ourselves in others. The paradox of loneliness and companionship is that we often find friendship when we are not trying to find it. And looking too hard for friendship rarely results in closeness. We find friendship when we reach out to others in sincerity, genuineness, and a willingness to share, to give and take.

Devote yourself to activities, hobbies, or projects that you care about. When you find yourself in the company of others who have similar interests and outlooks, you are likely to find such people interesting and worth getting to know. Find out about others. One of the most effective ways out of loneliness is to commit ourselves to others. What can you do to help others?

## Distraction

Another way to combat loneliness is to distract ourselves by shopping, taking a drive, going for a walk, or doing something for ourselves such as buying new clothes or getting a new hairstyle. In moderation, these distractions seem to jog us into motion and out of passivity. By themselves they will probably not be successful, but occasionally they help us along.

## Maintaining Hope

Even thinking and reading about loneliness can make us feel lonely. Yet the first step in dealing with loneliness is acknowledging it, knowing when and where it happens, and having some plans for how to cope with it. If you can manage these feelings effectively, you can experience the peace of solitude and the pleasure of helping others. Take pride in your first relaxed moments of solitude when the fear subsides, and be active in working, living, and being a part of your community.

## For Further Reading

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